

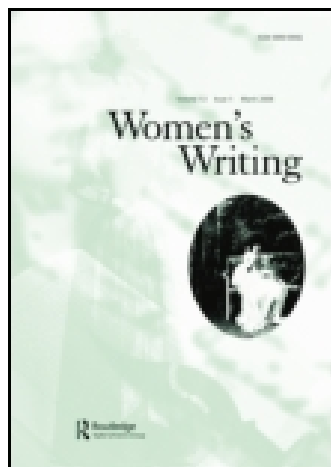
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CINDERELLA AND HER SISTERS IN NEW WOMAN WRITING AND ELLA HEPWORTH DIXON'S FICTION

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CINDERELLA AND HER SISTERS IN NEW WOMAN WRITING AND ELLA HEPWORTH DIXON'S FICTION

This essay explores feminist forms of retelling the Cinderella story in a fin-de-siècle context. Cinderella as a fairy-tale figure stands at the centre of women's interrogation of contemporaneous formations of fantasy and a growing disenchantment with a paragon of femininity defined by suffering, passivity and salvation through marriage. Proliferating reformulations of Cinderella's tale in New Woman writing suggest that protofeminist authors were preoccupied with the literary representation and social function of this story since Cinderella's self-abnegating tendencies were perceived as feminine virtues by many Victorians. At the same time, the tale also became a paradigmatic narrative of sisterly antagonism and rivalry, and was therefore revised by Ella Hepworth Dixon and other New Woman writers, who advocated work, independence and sisterly solidarity, and enquired what it meant to be both bound to and unable to fit into restrictive orthodox narratives, metonymically expressed in the trope of a tiny slipper.

"Turn back, turn back, thou foolish maid,"
Her godmother then said,
"Back to thy house-tree's shielding shade.
And bake thy batch of bread."
"I'll not go back to mix my dough
With tear-drops tired and hot;
The dish may into pieces go,
And brownies tend the pot."¹

This essay explores feminist forms of retelling the Cinderella story in a *fin-de-siècle* context. Cinderella as a fairy-tale figure stands at the centre of women's interrogation of contemporaneous formations of fantasy and a growing disenchantment with a paragon of femininity defined by servitude, silent suffering and passive expectation for salvation through marriage. As Kate Flint observes, one of the most distinctive features of New Woman fiction is its

"intertextuality", testifying to an engagement with authorship and interpretation through other narratives.² Proliferating reformulations of Cinderella's tale in New Woman fiction suggest that its authors were preoccupied with the literary representation and social function of this story. Cinderella's self-abnegating tendencies "are exactly those that the Victorians held to be peculiarly women's virtues".³ At the same time, for many Victorians, the tale also became "the paradigmatic narrative of sisterly antagonism".⁴ At the turn of the century, however, Cinderella's domesticity, matrimony and sororal hostility are revised by writers who enquire what it means to be both bound to and unable to fit into restrictive orthodox narratives, metonymically expressed in the trope of a tiny slipper. They develop the aesthetic and political potentialities of the fairy tale to advocate sisterhood, and challenge traditional conceptualizations of women's labour to which they, as women and as writers, have been "fettered" like Cinderella.

Charles Perrault's version of "Cinderella" was translated into English in the eighteenth century, and has been reprinted many times since. At the turn of the nineteenth century, it was included by Andrew Lang, who had a special appreciation of Perrault, in *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889). As a folklorist, Lang took a great interest in the story of Cinderella, collecting and examining various versions of it from the 1870s to the 1890s. As Elizabeth Keyser notes, an examination of his *Blue Fairy Book* shows that "the most familiar" tales reward "beauty [and] passivity",⁵ encouraging conformity to the roles of wife and mother, including the heroine's surrender to a prince as a means to obtain social and materialistic gains. Not only were gender roles in these stories traditional and long-standing, but, from Andrew Lang's anthropological point of view, the fairy-tale form itself represented the oldest and truest history of mankind and its narrative skills, so that "Cinderella", as the model fairy tale, "inhabit[ed] that utopian space outside modernity".⁶ He wrote the introduction to Marian Roalfe Cox's comprehensive structural and comparative study of the origins, history and distribution of 345 variants of the story, *Cinderella* (1892–93), which was published just a year prior to Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894). However, Dixon did not share Lang's views of the fairy world as a sacred space outside modernity or current politics, his longing for the fantastic past or the collective enshrining of woman's traditional domestic qualities. On the contrary, in New Woman writing, where the heroine is often a writer, looking backwards too intently—as the suffrage poet Ethel Carnie suggests in the line "Turn back, turn back, thou foolish maid"—could in itself become a trap that binds the heroine-writer to a restrictive conclusion.

Caroline Sumpter has recently shown that the Victorian press reinvented and reinvigorated fairy tales, adapting them to urban surroundings, new circumstances, mass media and modern readership. Fairy narratives were

updated, brought to bear on the present, and utilized as a vehicle for discussing such issues as industrialism, feminism and socialism in relevant contexts.⁷ Sumpter mentions New Woman fiction very briefly, not referring to Dixon, perhaps because at first sight the latter may seem averse to fantasy. As Valerie Fehlbauer says, in 1895, when “fundamental questions were being asked about the functions and aims of fiction in general”, Dixon distinctly championed “Realism” as the “truth, *la vérité vraie*”, the genre of choice in the *Humanitarian*.⁸ Yet she was also fascinated by fairy tales: “I was born [...] the youngest of three sisters; therefore by all the laws of fairy-land, bound to be lucky”.⁹ Dixon, whose charmed life included “journalistic activities [...] mixed up with a great deal of dancing and dining out; white tulle skirts [which, at night] took the place [...] of inky fingers”, kept returning to Cinderella in playful, if complex, self-projections and in her most realistic, dark, modern pieces.¹⁰

Hers was a cautionary viewpoint that highlighted the need to cultivate a new feminine cultural experience of these old tales. She meshed in her retelling of “Cinderella” the Grimm and Perrault versions—the most popular and well known in her time.¹¹ Perrault introduces the midnight element, when the magic is dispelled, so that Cinderella has to watch the clock carefully. In the Grimm version, neither the maid who is waiting for a prince-rescuer nor her sisters show any empathy or compassion for fellow sufferers. When the sisters try the slipper on, hoping to become the prince’s chosen bride, their feet prove too large, whereupon their mother hands them a knife and asks them to cut, mutilate and reshape their feet so that the shoe would fit.¹² Dixon incorporates the passing time, the ballroom scenes, disfigured feet and disappointed sisters into her own modern, disillusioned versions. Yet her plots suggest that the classic Cinderella paradigm is too narrow for a new century and its new forms of femininity, fantasy and fiction. She and other New Woman writers deploy the Cinderella framework to revise its structure and motifs so as to expand existing genre and gender boundaries, contest traditional conceptualizations of women’s labour and reject impractical plots, dated role models, restrictive aesthetics and dependence on princes.

The Cinderella tale became increasingly politicized by the labour press of the 1890s, as child poverty, urban slums and deprivation were discussed in the *Cinderella Supplement* and at various Cinderella clubs.¹³ Tensions between the modern press as “epitomizing industrial culture, modernity, and progress” and the old oral tradition of folklore were, in fact, productive,¹⁴ generating an “experimental terrain” where “new aesthetic and political possibilities” for literary genres were explored.¹⁵ Women’s engagement with folk-tale scholarship, retelling and reinterpretation was vital to the genre’s development, as well as to its appropriation and application to expose class and gender injustice, and advocate social and cultural reform. If, as Sumpter proposes, the

fairy tale became “a familiar tool in the visualisation of class relations”, highlighting the “fantastic foundations that underpinned middle-class reality”,¹⁶ “Cinderella” also became central to an increasingly critical inspection of bourgeois gender relations and their fantastic foundations. This critique was very wide and varied, as female writers, journalists, novelists and campaigners from many—at times, opposing—camps reappropriated the story, in ways which testified both to their different political claims and to internal conflicting attitudes towards womanhood. Thus, for example, Mrs Humphry Ward, a leading novelist and anti-suffrage activist, described in *Helbeck of Bannisdale* (1898) a particularly conflicted heroine, Laura, as a disappointed Cinderella. An orphaned girl who lost her mother and learns to live with a Catholic stepmother, she is lured into an alliance with a problematic prince whose Catholic lifestyle and upbringing clash with her own background and desire for liberty, agnosticism and equal opportunities. In his patriarchal, rigid household, Laura is asked to recite a fairy tale for the benefit of other orphan girls at the local Catholic school. However, at this crisis in her life, Laura tellingly forgets all the fairy tales of her early childhood, and can hardly remember “Cinderella”. Eventually, she “stumbled through” the happy fairy tale “with some difficulty”.¹⁷

When Laura completes the tale of Cinderella, however imperfectly and reluctantly, she has to listen to the girls’ tale in return. The heroine’s response to their story—one that is repeated “like a lesson in class”—is instructive.¹⁸ The recitation, about a saint who had left his sinning brother and has never yielded to feelings of mercy or brotherly love, mirrors Cinderella’s story in some ways. The lack of female solidarity and compassion in the latter is echoed by a similar, though religiously motivated, cruelty towards a suffering brother. The fairy tale and *Helbeck’s Book of the Lives of Saints* both set orthodox and narrow role models which, at this point, fail and baffle Laura, and their uncritical recitation and reception are clearly indicated as a means of indoctrination, which she resists. The very analogy between a saint’s story and a fairy tale may suggest the author’s own ambivalence towards the authenticity and relevance of both forms to modern women’s lives, and reflect her concern that the narratives which have shaped the lives of Victorian girls for decades set impossible, even wrong standards for them to follow. The fact that Ward rejects the “happy ending” solutions in both forms as conclusions to her own novel is no less important. Whereas in *Cinderella* the heroine is married to the prince, and in the sainthood story the soul’s everlasting salvation is guaranteed through exemplary obedience, Laura cannot reconcile herself to either option. She cannot marry her aristocratic hero because he and his order are “tyrannous”, while obedient redemption through faith is equally impossible. This narrative impasse, resulting in a controversial final scene where she commits suicide, may function as an indictment of inadequate

options for girls and for women writers. It may also testify to Ward's own mixed feelings: like the author, the heroine is not a New Woman, but a woman in search of modern self-determination. While the author objected to women's franchise, she did contribute to "the public discussion over the position of women and their role in civic life",¹⁹ aiming to improve their education and participation in local government. Just as she was urging social reform, Ward was also questioning women's position in fiction.

Whilst Ward can hardly be adopted as a model New Woman writer, her deployment of the Cinderella story structure and topoi is typical of *fin-de-siècle* New Woman plots, which tend not to hinge on love exclusively, but rather question and complicate the dominant role of romantic longing in female life and fiction, invoking a different kind of loss—the lack of proper education, independence, agency and professional opportunities. New Woman fiction is generally not preoccupied with transgressive or forbidden desires as much as with the failure of conventional romance. Whereas Oscar Wilde's fairy tales tell stories "of impossible longing and loss" which underline "the doomed nature of socially prohibited love",²⁰ Dixon's fiction, for example, tends to present princes as eminently eligible, if disappointing and unreliable. Love is possible and socially sanctioned, but presented as an unattractive option. Its difficulties often serve to allow the heroine time enough to closely examine and then dismiss the object of her dreams. Like traditional fairy tales, Dixon's stories "are dominated by themes of work and service", focusing on exploitation and uneven distribution of means.²¹ Vladimir Propp's study of deep forms in *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928) reveals that tales exhibit a structural valence between a "lack" and "lack liquidated", as an initial state of deprivation is overcome and the conclusion is marriage and enthronement. As Susan Stewart notes:

[Cinderella] promises a break in the chain of gruelling necessity binding the subject to his or her struggle for existence and this is what makes the tale worth telling [...] [M]arriage [...] is political and pragmatic [as] the resolution of the protagonist's suffering.²²

But this is not so in New Woman tales, where women's work is viewed as essential and is reinforced as a realistic, if not ideal, solution, even in concluding scenes. The struggle for existence remains fierce and, while the heroine may not win it, she will try. Further, readers are invited to consider whether the single state is not better than a compromising romantic alliance. The "lack liquidated", if only partly, is the assertion of oneself as an active woman writer and worker in the world.

In 1899, Dixon was one of a growing number of New Woman writers who refused to provide the reading public with neat marriage plots in the

Cinderella format on both ideological and aesthetic grounds. She said it was “tolerably certain that whatever the novel of the next century” would be about, it would not “concern itself exclusively with the gentle art of angling for husbands. Marriage as the end of everything does not appeal to our modern novelist”.²³ In *The Story of a Modern Woman*, the heroine’s taste for fairy tales in childhood is an early indicator that favourite fairy-tale plots would be tested and examined in relation to modern women’s expectations and disappointments, and that the fairy-tale framework would provide a poignant counterpoint to its failure to materialize in real life. Mary Erle’s lover, Vincent Hemming, is cast as an errant, unfaithful and mercenary prince.

Years of patient expectation come to nothing as he abandons the heroine for a richer bride, and no other man comes to the rescue. The heroine’s best friend, Alison Ives, is another potential Cinderella, albeit of a privileged and affluent background, because she is quite devoted to the idea and implementation of matrimony. Although Alison is dedicated to the cause of poor women, she prepares to marry herself, and encourages all her female friends and dependents—including Mary—to become brides. As Fehlbaum points out, both she and her mother are ever busy plotting nuptials,²⁴ and it is exactly this failure to imagine other plots which proves fatal to Alison, who plans to marry an eminent London surgeon. When nursing a dying, impoverished girl, Alison suddenly finds that the poor patient—“Number Twenty-seven”—has been her suitor’s lover, whose claims the surgeon refuses to acknowledge. Here, Dixon dramatizes the moment when three different, but equally disenchanted, Cinderellas—one a middle-class writer, one an aristocratic activist and the third a poor, nameless girl—meet and confront their lost “happily ever after” scripts.

Yet if in Dixon’s novel Cinderella is vital to our understanding of the shortcomings of institutionalized, centralized romance in life and in fiction, surely she also gestures towards a future potential that may be developed and realized by women readers. When the fallen girl speaks out at last, revealing the unpleasant truth, Alison herself becomes ill and is, in turn, nursed by her friend Mary. Alison’s time—following Cinderella’s—is up at midnight, when her charmed life and romantic structures collapse and come to an end. The aristocratic surroundings of Alison’s deathbed scene, accentuated by the recurrent allusions to a French clock, at once evoke and disavow Charles Perrault’s gentrified, elegant tale, where Cinderella is visualized in a splendid dress and a pair of tiny slippers. Cinderella’s small shoes no longer fit her swollen, disfigured feet:

In the silence of the large bedroom, in which the only other sound was that of the sprightly French clock on the mantelpiece, ticking away the hours, the sick woman’s delirious mutterings seemed of fearful

importance [...] Long after, Mary remembered the last coherent words she had said: "Will my feet get slim again when I am well?" She pushed one foot from under the bed-clothes. It was quite disfigured already.²⁵

It seems that in her last moments, Mary's friend can only think of her failure to fit into the fixed standards of feminine aesthetics in a patriarchal value system: "Funny [...] What's his name? the sculptor—the Royal Academician, you know—modelled my foot once. It would be beastly [...] to have great fat feet like that".²⁶ Alison's dependence on generic and gender forms moulded by male authors and artists is imagined as her ruin in a novel which recurrently juxtaposes the internalization of such forms with a resistant questioning of them. Significantly, Mary Erle, the New Woman heroine-writer, had been trying to enter the Royal Academy herself, and noticed that boys who befriended the Royal Academicians and produced the standard beautiful feminine forms stood a better chance.

It is fruitful to consider Alison's alternate positions as a female subject and object in relation to Mary's more consistent subject position through the description of Alison's dainty, elegant feet, as opposed to Mary's own view of her feet in the context of mobility and work. She receives her bootmaker's bill shortly after Alison's remarks about her feet, and immediately decides that the small salary from the editor of the *Fan* shall pay for her boots: "There was something incongruous about that bootmaker's bill. And yet, after all, one had to pay one's boot bill, even if one's lover was going to be married tomorrow".²⁷ At this point, the heroine exchanges Cinderella's tiny slipper, fairy wedding and princess status for a life of professional work and independence. Dixon's playful reworking of the motif of the tiny slipper that metamorphoses into a sturdy boot reflects both the gradual supplanting of fairy landscapes by urban spaces and contemporary concerns about the wage-earning woman of the future: "[Will] Woman in the future [...] 'foot the bill'? [Many] see in the present emancipation of their sisters and daughters, the thin end of the economic wedge".²⁸ It is also worth noting that Dixon followed in the footsteps of the socialist journalist Robert Blatchford, whose meshing of realism and fantasy was devoted to the improvement of working conditions. He wrote about the new waged female worker as a modern Cinderella just a year prior to the publication of *The Story of a Modern Woman*:

The Cinderella clubs were started [...] BY CINDERELLA! Yes my dears, by Cinderella herself. Mind; I don't mean the Cinderella of the story book, who got to be a princess because she had small feet. No; I mean a real Cinderella [...] who had neither small feet, nor a fairy godmother.²⁹

After reading Olive Schreiner's fable in which an expectant mother wishes for her child that "the ideal shall be real to thee",³⁰ Blatchford suggested that the "magic wand" which would transform the next generation is, in fact, the pen of the writer. Regenerating and rehabilitating society, he implied, was not to be entrusted to "a fairy godmother",³¹ but rather to radical authors such as New Woman writers.

Alison's suffering both resists and reassesses fairy narratives of hope, faith and providence. It critiques not only the Grimms' mutilated feet and the glorification of immobile, useless feminine forms, but also the biblical narrative of Nehemiah 9.21: "Yea, forty years didst thou sustain them in the wilderness, so that they lacked nothing; their clothes waxed not old, and their feet swelled not". Nevertheless, salvation is already there, in Alison's last words. As she dies, Alison urges her friend Mary: "Promise me that you will never, never do anything to hurt another woman".³² This selfless request, so strikingly contrasting with Cinderella's privileging of personal promotion at the expense of other sisters, stresses the supremacy of sisterly solidarity, which is presented as fundamental to social cohesion and healing. As Sally Ledger has argued, while Alison Ives "may not be able to propose a serious solution to the problems of the women of the East End", her sense of solidarity with her fellow women is infectious—she transmits it to Mary.³³ Class privileges and romance prospects are supplanted by a new feminist sensibility. Thus, Mary refuses to accept Vincent Hemming's late and compromised courtship, since her own personal pleasure would pain his wife: "I can't, I won't, deliberately injure another woman".³⁴ Athena Vrettos has pointed out that in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), for example, Jo's illness "link[s] disparate groups of people through the process of contagion", showing "the potential instability of human identity".³⁵ Dickens's Caddy Jellyby weds her "Prince", Mr Turveydrop, whom she met at the Academy that taught her dance and deportment, but she does not communicate with Judy, who "never heard of Cinderella".³⁶ New Woman writers reconfigure conceptions of self and its relations with the world through contagion, which substantiates the permeability of social and bodily boundaries, as well as the private and public spheres, but the blurring lines are potentially transformative to an emerging communal feminist identity (the sisterhood), and are celebrated rather than rejected or feared. In fact, they replace the earlier, traditional transformation of the poor, downtrodden individual (Cinderella) into a richly attired princess. Dixon's choice of the heroine's name foreshadows the shift towards a collective identity: "Mary Erle" echoes Elizabeth Barrett Browning's lowly Marian Erle in *Aurora Leigh* (1856), but the two heroines of the poem—the woman writer and the fallen girl—are united. And indeed, Dixon claimed Barrett Browning as "one of the earliest of the 'new women'".³⁷

Another formative “godmother” whose “magic wand” is felt in the New Woman novel is Olive Schreiner, whom Dixon greatly admired.³⁸ Schreiner’s heroine in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), Lyndall, is a pessimistic girl whose frustration with women’s lack of prospects would not immediately align her with a fairy princess. However, the fairy-tale dimension of her identity is revealed through “a pair of velvet slippers” that she leaves behind. They are found by Gregory Rose, who searches for traces of his beloved Lyndall: “Only one woman’s feet had worn them, he knew that [. . .] [He] never saw any feet so small”.³⁹ The slippers confirm her status as a Cinderella, whose “tiny, very tiny feet” build on, corporealize and critique restrictive constructions of femininity: eventually, the heroine is immobilized by a deadly illness and is literally unable to walk. Yet Schreiner’s dark rendition of the fairy tale—the heroine’s suffering and the failure of the prince to rescue her in time—may serve as a meta-fictional commentary on its moral. The small slippers embody the disjunction and discord between fantasy and reality, what women are told to dream about and what they really need. Schreiner implies here and elsewhere that the real salvation lies in equal education and opportunities, active work and the ability to make cultural contributions.⁴⁰ The modern Cinderella’s tragedy is not merely a tardy prince, but a wider sociocultural and literary anachronism which can only be resolved by exchanging hopes of a royal wedding for paid work. Thus, a decade before Dixon’s novel, in one of the earliest and most influential New Woman novels, fantastic fairy-tale narratives are not re-imagined as liberating discourses, but rather as confining and restrictive frameworks. Nevertheless, liberation may emerge from their restructuring and critical reinterpretation. Dixon and Schreiner, like other “writers of feminist fairy tales, reject not only the ‘happily ever after’ ending but also the recommended means of obtaining it”.⁴¹

An increasingly important element in this feminist retelling of “Cinderella” in many New Woman narratives is sisterhood as an ideological, emotional and socio-political bond. At times reconfigured as an actual, biological blood tie, it becomes absolutely essential to the idea of self-realization and to the plot, often substituting the “happily ever after” conclusion. Sisterhood—its strength or absence—would often determine the final scenes. The centrality of an alternative sisterly bond as a founding element in society and literature highlights and addresses what Carole Pateman identifies as the “repressed”, omitted, silenced part in the “genesis tale” of the liberal state and its patriarchal politics. According to Pateman, “stories of the origins of civil society found in the classic social contracts theories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” concentrated on the fraternal pact as constituting and legitimating patriarchal civic society, leaving sisters outside politics and political theory.⁴² New Woman narratives often insist on challenging the dominance of the “fraternal pact” by underlining the idea that the “civil body

politic created through [fraternity] is fashioned after only one of the two bodies of the humankind".⁴³ Concomitantly, they also question the traditional key notion that civil society is created by the separation and opposition between the modern, public and political sphere and the private, familial sphere. Dixon and contemporary feminist writers typically undermine such a rigid separation of spheres, and inquire how women could be fully incorporated into a civil state and how abstract conceptions of classic liberal theory may accommodate and account for sisterhood, too.

Dixon's own sisters played an important part in her life and work. From 1878 to 1884, both Ella and Marion studied and exhibited art, and later the two sisters' careers ran parallel as they both contributed to the press. Further, Marion was involved in the publication of Ella's short story collection, *My Flirtations* (1892). But Dixon applied the congenial and constructive female family mode of interaction to an increasing circle of other women: she had "no objection to being called a New Woman, or an advanced female, or even one of the shrieking sisterhood".⁴⁴ On a historical level, as Olive Banks and Philippa Levine point out, although the first wave of feminist commitment was not limited to the internal socialization of women in a family, it was often modelled on it. For many women in this period, "the family was the primary site through which their lives were ordered and contained",⁴⁵ and sisters—as the cases of the Garretts, Pankhursts, Ashursts, Müllers and many others demonstrate—often stood shoulder to shoulder in their shared public campaigns. Thus, sisterhood became pivotal not only for "its psychological influence" and inherent social function, but also for its ideological conceptualization of the relationships between private and public, as well as the nature of civic responsibility and civil contracts between women in a modern society. The power of sisterhood to transform Cinderella or ruin her is perhaps most vividly delineated in Dixon's short stories, in the developing contrast between "One Doubtful Hour" and "Its Own Reward".⁴⁶ The former tale, in its utter lack of sisterly support, illuminates and magnifies the role of the sister in the latter. Both stories are punctuated with repeating Cinderella tropes: the ballroom, the dances, the clock and passing time, the spell and, last but not least, the putative prince and wedding.

In "One Doubtful Hour", Effie, tired of the endless balls and the "five-shilling dances which form the marriage-market", is still compelled to repeat the old Cinderella routine and dance on as "a woman, made desperate with disappointment"⁴⁷ by her inability to measure up to an impossible fairy-tale model. As Cheryl Wilson shows, late Victorian representations of dancing negotiated complex poetic and politicized matrices between the New Woman and aestheticism. Wilson's examination of the representation of dancing in *fin-de-siècle* poems by women writers reveals the strategies through which they "revised women's experience of dancing while challenging the established

practises of the Victorian ballroom”,⁴⁸ its strict rules of etiquette and gender politics, and its broader ensemble of aesthetic practices and representational, almost ritual, powers. In Dixon’s stories, as in contemporary women’s writing, “the ways in which a woman’s fate is tied to the ballroom—a situation which enforces her repeated participation in the rituals of heterosexual courtship”—are both emphasized and criticized.⁴⁹ The formative role models (however different) provided by the popular dancers and brides-to-be in Cinderella’s story and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) are a case in point. Like Cinderella and Elizabeth Bennet, Effie has a bad-tempered mother. Like Elizabeth, she is scorned at the ballroom by an attractive man who is a potential suitor and husband, as well as a deliverer from poverty and spinsterhood. However, unlike Austen’s fortunate heroine, she is no longer young, and she ultimately fails to impress the prince. Also unlike Austen’s heroine, she has no supportive, loving sister, but rather an unloving, distant sister-in-law, whose unkindness hastens her fateful return to the marriage market. Leaving yet another unsuccessful cheap dance and courtship scene, Effie gasses herself to death and is found “on the bed, silent, inert, still dressed in her black ball-gown”.⁵⁰ The absence of a valid sisterly bond may account, at least partly, for the different fates of Elizabeth and Effie. Moreover, Dixon presents the magnificent ballroom dress as a death trap to the modern woman. Instead of charming the prince, it holds women as if spellbound, waiting in a ballroom and mourning an elusive marital bliss. The traditional “feminine virtues” of silence and passivity (“inert”) are deadly.

The uncritical reception of the fairy tale’s construction of femininity, its plots and paraphernalia is criticized both here and in the second story. The baby girl who is being delivered upstairs as Effie lies dying is a chilling rather than life-affirming prospect. Potentially, Dixon seems to say, one girl replaces another, as all girls are destined to consume the same sad story and repeat its ritualistic, destructive practices. In contrast, “Its Own Reward” ends on a happier and more hopeful note. Although the two stories share the same concerns, motifs and meta-texts, this tale diverges from “One Doubtful Hour” in its representation of strong sisterly bonds, which resist the traditional Cinderella paradigm and reconfigure the relationships of the heroine with other women. The sisters, Lily and Amy, are penniless orphans who try to make their way in the world following their father’s bankruptcy and death. Amy’s lover, not unlike Mary Erle’s suitor, withdraws from their engagement, leaving her with the broken promise of a wedding day and the fragments of a fairy tale. Amy cannot reconstruct her life or imagine another end:

[...] alone at night in her draughty bedroom, she found herself continually thinking of the young ma[n] [...] She wondered if he still went to the Kilburn Town Hall dances, [...] Starved in body and soul,

the young girl clung to the memory of her one happiness. In all the hundreds of novels she had read, it was always argued that—for a woman, at least—one love was sufficient for a lifetime.⁵¹

Maddened by her inability to return to those dances, to win her prince back and secure the traditional happy ending as prescribed by fairy tales and romantic novels, Amy gradually descends into a nervous breakdown and fixation: she cannot let go of the illusion that her false lover shall come to her rescue even when he marries another girl. It certainly does not help that for her living she has to reproduce and disseminate the Cinderella narrative on a suburban, more modern and modest scale to thousands of girls like her, promising to relocate them to “Happy Homes in Manitoba”. Locked in the wrong text, and incapable of inhabiting another one, Amy is saved only by the increasingly empathetic Aunt Charlotte, who is swayed by a “new wave of feminine sympathy”.⁵² Amy’s rescuer is her sister, who returns to London with a fortune: “Now that Lily had come back, all would be right again”. Lily not only reverses the Cinderella plot in that she helps where the prince fails, but also encourages her sister—and the readers—to reconsider the literary convention: “Well, he was never half good enough for Amy, but if she has any fancy for him still, why, it can be arranged”, through money. We understand that Amy is really on the mend when she rejects the marital option: “No, no. Let me go away with you, [...] I want to get well and strong, [...] Don’t let’s ever part again”.⁵³ This conclusion reverberates with the feminine fairy-tale mode of Christina Rossetti’s sisterly utopia in “Goblin Market” (1862).

Rossetti’s poem, according to Sarah Annes Brown, became a nineteenth-century “paradigmatic text for the theme of sororal rescue”,⁵⁴ and was thus diametrically opposed to the Cinderella paradigm of sororal enmity and rivalry.⁵⁵ The smooth shift from one paradigm to its contrasting modality is surely an achievement on both literary and ideological levels. Yet it is important to remember that for a turn-of-the-century feminist writer, the line “there is no friend like a sister”⁵⁶ was not applied to promote safety in the confines of one’s home. At a time when transatlantic agitation for universal suffrage was taking place, and international women’s organizations were increasingly cooperating and communicating with each other, many British feminist writers adopted a more global view of their sisters’ status and plight. In this respect, a more contemporary influence on Dixon may have been the New Woman writer and campaigner Sarah Grand, whose influential book *The Heavenly Twins* was reviewed alongside *The Story of a Modern Woman* by W.T. Stead in 1894. A few years earlier, Grand had published another novel, *Ideala* (1888), which, as its title suggests, explored and represented an “ideal” modern woman in the making. Grand examined the relevance of Cinderella to the construction of such an updated identity, and concluded that the idea of the

tiny slipper as a necessary requirement for marriage and success was on a par with the Chinese custom of foot-binding.

In the third stage of her trajectory towards feminist selfhood and saintliness, Ideala, whose self-examination increasingly involves an inquiry into the state of women, seeks enlightenment and liberation abroad. Her final transformation takes place during a year she spends in China. But it is not a new dress or a glamorous slipper that signifies metamorphosis. As Ann Heilmann notes: “the ‘new’ Ideala comes into being in interaction with Chinese anti-foot-binding women campaigners, [...] The Chinese woman here serves [...] as a role model for British feminism”.⁵⁷ The cultural links between the Chinese custom and the fairy tale were being explored at exactly the same time from a scholarly point of view and, apparently, Andrew Lang himself first asserted that the element of the tiny shoe could point to the story’s origin: “a tale of this kind could not have originated in a naked and shoeless race”.⁵⁸ Several variations of the Cinderella story (under different titles) existed in China, and all held in common that the king fell in love with a small-sized girl whose shoe was the means of their union. Similarly, as anthropologists have pointed out, shoes occupy a ceremonial role in wedding and betrothal ceremonies there.⁵⁹ It was only natural that women thinkers who tried to forge a new female identity would draw on these links. Thus, in “Cassandra”, Florence Nightingale protested that as long as women were intellectually, culturally and legally constricted, their spirits and civic aspirations were warped, too: “What form do the Chinese feet assume when denied their proper development?”, she inquired as early as 1860.⁶⁰ The metaphor of the bound, stunted foot has become a key figure in New Woman writing: maimed feet in China both made and marked women as delicate dependents who were home-bound, thus serving feminist writers to signify patriarchal cultural repression. The connection is made clear in a *Humanitarian* article in 1896:

Public opinion in China decreed that women should have small feet; small feet were accordingly produced. Public opinion decreed that women should have wasp-waists, [which] thereupon became universal [...] the majority of women “suffered and were still”.⁶¹

The writer, the Hon. Coralie Glyn—the founder of the Camelot Club for women—seamlessly meshes in her lexis Sarah Stickney Ellis’s Victorian ideology of femininity with the feminist protest against Chinese foot-binding to protest against and revolutionize Victorian constructions of femininity. As Heilmann claims, while “Ideala does not particularize her experience with reference to individuals, she does challenge cultural and colonial stereotypes”.⁶² Chinese women are “not at all suppressed”; many British wives also

suffer from the absence of occupation and mobility; China does not hold a monopoly on crimes against women and children—if Chinese girls are sold into slavery, British girls are abandoned to prostitution. Chinese foot-binding is correlated to Western fashion dictates like corset-wearing.⁶³ “But”, protests a member of the audience in *Ideala*, “you cannot compare the Chinese to ourselves”.⁶⁴ “Certainly”, replies *Ideala*, Chinese women bind their feet, and “everybody approves”, but on learning that “it cripples them, and weakens them, and makes them unfit”, more and more take off the “bandages”, whereas Englishwomen still “bind every organ in their bodies”.⁶⁵ Here, Grand restates points made in *Two Dear Little Feet* (1873), whose English protagonist considers foot-binding and crippling herself for a misguided beauty ideal. The most unflattering comparison between Chinese and Victorian cultures occurs as *Ideala* asserts: “when I saw what the Chinese women were doing for themselves, and compared their state with our own, it seemed to me that there was work in plenty to be done at home”.⁶⁶ The figure of the bound foot thus serves Grand to underline that emancipation from material and conceptual confinement is necessary to all women. *Ideala*’s sacrifice of her love life and private happiness turns her into “a saint”, for she “feel[s] for all” rather than just for herself.⁶⁷ Grand thus redefines “heroism” and “sorority”, and presents a modern liberal alliance to rival and match the masculine civic principles of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Cinderella’s vanity, restrictive domesticity and matrimony play no part there. On the contrary, “[m]arriage is often like the shoe which looks so admirable a fit to others, but sorely pinches the foot that wears it”.⁶⁸

While this essay has been dedicated to the analysis of various forms of critique and revision of the Cinderella story in realistic New Woman fiction, it is important to mention in conclusion that during the closing decades of the century, there were other forms of generic experimentation with the fairy tale in general and “Cinderella” in particular. Whereas in the 1860s, as Laurence Talairach-Vielmas claims, Anne Thackeray Ritchie’s reworking of “Cinderella” and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) started deconstructing femininity as “extolled by conventional fairy tales [...] let[ting] in the world of consumer culture”,⁶⁹ the narrative remained preoccupied with female aesthetization and centred on a visual metamorphosis of the heroine into a prototypical princess. Indeed, “Lady Audley appears as another Cinderella in her fairy palace”.⁷⁰ Braddon disrupts readers’ expectations by presenting a modern Cinderella as a passionate subject who desires, consumes and actively pursues her rags-to-riches fantasies. However, both consumerism and female aesthetization, which juxtapose and risk conflating women and objects, are not the focal point in various turn-of-the-century feminist reconstructions of “Cinderella”. Many New Woman texts depart from and even satirize the culture of consumption and beautification, often deploying material

consumerism (a pretty ballroom dress or an elegant shoe) as a metaphor for the ideological consumption of conventional conceptualizations of femininity. Instead, they offer self-reliance, friendship, cultural production and labour. Patricia Johnson analyses Ethel Carnie's revolutionary early poetry as expressive of both "labor unrest and woman's suffrage agitation", critiquing ideals of masculine and upper-class art and the alignment of women with cheap labour, political passivity and cultural impoverishment.⁷¹ Carnie, as a suffrage activist, working-class woman writer and editor, reappraises female labour and, in particular, woman's writing in a male-dominated world. In "Cinderella: A Modern Version", she both claims domestic drudgery as part of the poetic realm by turning women's work into an appropriate subject of art and dramatizes Blatchford's claim that the magic wand should be taken from the dated, home-bound fairy godmother and appropriated by the woman writer.⁷² Likewise, Evelyn Sharp, a key figure in Women's Social and Political Union and the United Suffragists, and Netta Syrett, her neighbour and friend, both contributed to periodicals and wrote fairy tales. Their stories concentrated on ambitious and capable heroines.⁷³ Rebellion was intrinsic to these modern fairy tales, which often "took advantage" of traditional subject matter to "make political points and challenge conventional wisdom" and gender roles, "reject[ing] the idea of a perfect princess".⁷⁴ Although they experimented with different genres, Dixon and her colleagues channelled the transformative powers of Cinderella to constitute a communal and collective identity. "Cinderella's work" became the political project of resisting traditional romance ideology and reconfiguring women's relation to labour, literature and civic responsibility.

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Notes

- 1 Ethel Carnie, "Cinderella: A Modern Version," *Voices of Womanhood* (London: Headley, 1914) 47–50 (49).
- 2 Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993) 15.
- 3 Micael M. Clarke, "Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and the Grimms' Cinderella," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 40.4 (2000): 695–710 (707).

- 4 Sarah Annes Brown, *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 122.
- 5 Elizabeth Keyser, "Feminist Revisions: Frauds on the Fairies," *Children's Literature* 17 (1989): 156–70 (158).
- 6 Caroline Sumpter, *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2008) 178.
- 7 Carole G. Silver, rev. of *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale*, by Caroline Sumpter, *Victorian Studies* 51.4 (2009): 738–40 (738).
- 8 Valerie Fehlbau, *Ella Hepworth Dixon: The Story of a Modern Woman* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) 41.
- 9 Qtd. in Fehlbau 18.
- 10 Fehlbau 10.
- 11 The Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm version of the tale known today as "Cinderella"—"Ash Girl"—was first published in 1812.
- 12 Maria Tatar, ed., *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts and Criticism* (New York: Norton, 1999) 117–22.
- 13 Tatar 739. In the late nineteenth century, Blatchford and other individuals in the Cinderella movement decided to provide food, tea and entertainment for poor children. They formed "Cinderella clubs", named after the fairy-tale character, to address specific problems associated with children's welfare in England.
- 14 Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, rev. of *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale*, by Caroline Sumpter, *Marvels and Tales* 23.2 (2009): 425–28 (425).
- 15 Sumpter 5.
- 16 Sumpter 175–76.
- 17 Mary Augusta Ward, *Helbeck of Bannisdale* (London: Penguin, 1983) 123.
- 18 Ward 123.
- 19 Julia Bush, *Women against the Vote: Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 41.
- 20 Sumpter 171.
- 21 Susan Stewart, "Genres of Work: the Folktale and *Silas Marner*," *New Literary History* 34.4 (2003): 513–33 (515).
- 22 Stewart 516.
- 23 From the *Lady's Pictorial* 9 Sept. 1899: 353; qtd. in Fehlbau 35.
- 24 Fehlbau 137.
- 25 Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2004) 167–71.
- 26 Dixon 167–68.
- 27 Dixon 169.
- 28 Ella Hepworth Dixon, "Pensées de Femme," *Lady's Pictorial* 19 June 1895: 969; qtd. in Fehlbau 57.
- 29 *Cinderella Supplement* June 1893; qtd. in Sumpter 102.

- 30 Olive Schreiner, "A Dream of Wild Bees," *Dreams* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1892) 89–96 (96).
- 31 Sumpter 103–04.
- 32 Dixon, *Modern Woman* 164.
- 33 Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997) 160.
- 34 Dixon, *Modern Woman* 184.
- 35 Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) 3.
- 36 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) Chapter 21.
- 37 Qtd. in Fehlbaum 26.
- 38 Fehlbaum 142.
- 39 Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 234.
- 40 These topics preoccupied Schreiner and were more fully discussed in *Woman and Labour* (1911).
- 41 Keyser 157.
- 42 Carole Pateman, "The Fraternal Social Contract," *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989) 33–57 (33).
- 43 Pateman 34.
- 44 Fehlbaum 26. Dixon was referring to the popular derogatory appellation which the anti-feminist press, led by Eliza Lynn Linton, attached to the New Woman.
- 45 Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian England: Private Roles and Public Commitment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 18–28 (19).
- 46 Both stories were published in Ella Hepworth Dixon, *One Doubtful Hour and Other Side-Lights on the Feminine Temperament* (London: Grant Richards, 1904). All references to these two stories are to this edition.
- 47 Dixon, "One Doubtful Hour" 1.
- 48 Cheryl Wilson, "Politicizing Dance in Late-Victorian Women's Poetry," *Victorian Poetry* 46.2 (2008): 191–205 (192).
- 49 Wilson 194.
- 50 Dixon, "One Doubtful Hour" 30.
- 51 Dixon, "Its Own Reward" 66.
- 52 Dixon, "Its Own Reward" 78–79.
- 53 Dixon, "Its Own Reward" 82.
- 54 Brown 46.
- 55 Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" is about two close sisters, Laura and Lizzie, who live by themselves in a secluded house. Laura is tempted by the goblin men and eats the fruit they sell. As a result, she falls into a decline and pines away. Finally, Lizzie resolves to visit the goblin men in order to rescue her sister. The goblins assault Lizzie, but she refuses them, and upon her return home, Laura eats and drinks the juice from her body. She

- recovers and, as the last stanza attests, both Laura and Lizzie live to tell their children of the goblins' fruits—and the magical powers of sisterly love.
- 56 Dixon, "One Doubtful Hour" 1.
- 57 Ann Heilmann, "Sex, Religion and the New Woman in China: Sarah Grand and Alicia Little," unpublished ms., 4.
- 58 Photeine P. Bourboulis, "The Bride-Show Custom and the Fairy Tale of Cinderella," *Cinderella: A Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988) 98–109 (100).
- 59 R.D. Jameson, "Cinderella in China," Dundes, *Cinderella* 71–97 (73).
- 60 Florence Nightingale, "Cassandra," *Cassandra and Suggestions for Thought*, ed. Mary Poovey (New York: New York UP, 1992) (206).
- 61 Hon. Coralie Glyn, "Nature's Nuns," *Humanitarian* 6 (Dec. 1896): 424.
- 62 Heilmann 5.
- 63 Sarah Grand, *Ideala* (Chicago, 1888) 172–74.
- 64 Grand 181.
- 65 Grand 183.
- 66 Grand 177.
- 67 Sarah Grand, "Josephine Butler Centenary," *Bath and Wilts Chronicle and Herald* 19 June 1928: 7.
- 68 Ouida, *Syrlin; or Position* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1890) 28.
- 69 Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007) 98.
- 70 Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding* 121.
- 71 Patricia E. Johnson, "Finding Her Voice(s): The Development of a Working-Class Feminist Vision in Ethel Carnie's Poetry," *Victorian Poetry* 43.3 (2005): 297–315 (297).
- 72 Blatchford was one of Carnie's first champions and helpers.
- 73 Angela V. John, *Evelyn Sharp, Rebel Woman 1869–1955* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009) 31.
- 74 John 32–33.

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